

Remarks
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Marine Hospital Service

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To the historian, there is something at Ellis Island, which is more than any symbol in America, calls to mind our history as a nation of immigrants. From 1892, when the first immigration station was opened in New York Harbor until the facilities were padlocked in 1954, an estimated 12 million would-be Americans passed through Ellis Island.

A great deal of the history of the Public Health Service was made at Ellis Island when those 12 million immigrants were – theoretically at least – passed under the watchful eye of the public health officials in order to keep contagious disease out of the country. At the time of my remarks, Ellis Island was in the beginning of rejuvenation under the auspices of the National Park Service in conjunction with the Statue of Liberty Foundation. The Great Hall was to become a national monument.

It was President Grover Cleveland who signed into law an act “To establish the Commissioned Corps to the Marine Hospital Service”. This became the present Commissioned Corps of the United States Public Health Service.

The public health work on Ellis Island was divided between “the line” where newly arriving immigrants were examined and staffing the 650 beds in the two hospitals built for the care of sick arrivals. Another responsibility was boarding of incoming ships to inspect cargos and crews. In those days, every commissioned officer of that epic served on a tour of duty on Ellis Island

This was a most nostalgic time for me because, on this occasion, I was accompanied by many I had worked with in the previous eight years and I was very shortly to step down from my duties at the end of my second full-term as Surgeon General.